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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7750  
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

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SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GOA ATTEMPTS TO CLOSE CRITICAL NEWSPAPER

REF: 09 TIRANA 2 AND PREVIOUS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE TREAT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In the latest move to muzzle critical voices, police forces have surrounded the offices of the small daily paper Tema and have prevented Tema's staff from entering the premises for the past four days, despite a Tirana court's January 6 ruling that Tema may remain in its offices. The imbroglio started when the GOA unilaterally cancelled Tema's 20-year lease on December 16. Tema's editor Mero Baze said the blockade is political in nature and said it is a response to his criticisms of PM Berisha and the GOA. For its part, the GOA claims it needs Tema's office space for "national security" reasons. Two opposition parties, the Movement for Socialist Integration (LSI) and the Socialist Party, have also criticized the GOA for its actions. End summary.

¶2. (U) On January 8, police forces surrounded the offices of the small circulation newspaper Tema and barred employees from entering. The next day, newspaper staff and other journalists and academics held a protest outside the building. As of January 12, Tema's staff still cannot enter its offices, but continues to work and print newspapers out of alternate office space donated by other sympathetic press outlets. Tema has not received an eviction notice, according to its editor Mero Baze.

GOA TO TEMA: GET OUT!

¶3. (U) On December 16, 2008, the Ministry of Economy, unilaterally and without notice, cancelled Tema's 20-year lease for the building, according to Baze. Baze described the actions of the GOA as intimidation against a paper critical of the government. For its part, the GOA has stated that Tema must relocate due to "national security" issues; the GOA claims it needs the space to house offices for the national voter ID card program. Tema filed suit against the seizure and on January 6, the Tirana Court ordered the GOA to cease efforts to evict Tema pending a final decision by the court on the merits of the Tema motion. Tema now plans to file a lawsuit against the police for ignoring this ruling. Interestingly, Baze's car also caught fire and exploded on December 31, in an event police labeled an accident.

OPPOSITION PARTIES SUPPORT TEMA

¶4. (U) LSI leader Ilir Meta, told media outlets that the right of the press to criticize the government is a key element of democracy, and SP Leader Edi Rama also appealed to the government in a press release to halt the blockade and allow the courts to settle the issue. Rama also urged the Director General of Police to not involve his officers in a political matter and reminded him that a Tirana court has previously ruled in Tema's favor.

COMMENT

15. (SBU) Even though the GOA probably has the right to evict Tema from the premises, surrounding the Tema building with police sends exactly the wrong message - a point we and others have made repeatedly with the GOA. The heavy handed GOA reaction to Tema gives the strong impression that this is just another example of GOA attempts to muzzle any opposition or critical voices as the June parliamentary elections approach and the Gerdec investigation draws to a close (reftel). While Baze was a longtime supporter of PM Berisha, he withdrew his support in 2008 as his paper was the first to connect Berisha's son to the Gerdec affair and report on Berisha's ties with suspected money launderer Damir Fazlic, a Bosnian-Serb businessman. This is also not the first time the GOA has attacked media outlets critical of its rule; in 2006 the GOA ordered the sometime critical Top Channel TV station to vacate its premises. The case is still pending in the courts.

CRISTINA